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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a facet of the organizational implications of an Afrocentric perspective in American education, primarily in public schools. It also explores, through two focus groups, the perceptions of 10 African-American school administrators and 10 teachers in a graduate education supervision class. The focus groups made it clear that the Afrocentric perspective in American education is an issue that has come of age; however, the data identified a few critical distinctions between administrators' and teachers' perceptions. Because of these differences in perspective, the argument arises that there is a need for Afrocentric resource centers within schools and educational systems and that the Afrocentric idea is an essential step toward progress and greater inclusion of Blacks into the American dream. (Contains four references.) (GLR)

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Empowerment Issues of An Afrocentric Perspective: Disempowering Racism In American Education

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Empowerment Issues of An Afrocentric Perspective:
Disempowering Racism In American Education

Introduction:

Is an Afrocentric perspective a right or an obligation of denied entitlement to tell our story, advocate our vested cause as African Americans. Dr. Molefi Asante (170) asserts that our lack of agency in the historic account of our unique experiences and contributions to African and world culture leaves us invisible even to ourselves. Thus he asserts, and I agree, that it is vital that we as African Americans establish agency to provide from our perspective the historical, political, social and organizational realities which we see as paramount to our self actualization in American society.

Asante (172) further asserts that "the Afrocentric idea presents the most revolutionary challenge to the ideology of White supremacy in education....No other theoretical position stated by African Americas has ever captured the imagination of such a wide range of scholars and students of history, sociology, communications, anthropology, and psychology." Clearly these areas comprise the essence of the very field of Organizational Behavior. This paper attempts to explore a facet of the organizational

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implications of an Afrocentric perspective in American Education, primarily public schools. It explores the through two focus groups the felt perceptions of ten African American school administrators and ten teachers in a graduate Education Supervision class, in which 5 women, 5 men, 5 black and 5 white students were enrolled.

Descriptive Statement Of The Issue:

What are the felt perceptions by teachers and administrators of the effectiveness of an Afrocentric perspective in American education. Do teachers and administrators agree, have no opinion, or disagree on the extent to which an Afrocentric perspective would be a valuable asset in American education for changing the current educational outcome and performance of socially and economically disadvantaged Afro-American students. Also to what extent do teachers feel an Afrocentric perspective in the functional areas of administration, curriculum, instruction, human relations, management, staffing, supervision, and leadership might assist organizations of education to disempower racism and empower teachers, administrators and students with a valuable tool for changing paradigms of ethnocentric conflict.

These issue were explored to see if administrators and teachers see a difference in the need for an Afrocentric perspective in the above mentioned areas, and to see if demographic characteristics such as race, sex, age, degree, years of experience, and level of instruction ie. primary, secondary, or higher education reflect any significant differences in their felt

perceptions. Unfortunately, this study was not extensive enough to explore in depth or with any statistical significance the demographic profile of sample responses. It did however, through the collection of data from our two focus groups identify several critical distinctions between administrator's verses teacher's perceptions, and raised several interesting questions concerning differences in perceptions related to race and gender.

Theoretical Argument:

Empowerment according to contemporary thought holds the key to solving old problems of ineffective bureaucracy through a new transference of power to the workers. In education this means teachers, administrators and students. Power says Peter Drucker (189) is rooted in ownership. This concept of ownership, because of its earlier form of slavery, provided African Americans a strange constituent positioning in the American institution of education. As such African people have not fully benefitted from the meritocratic bureaucracies of education. Historically, these structures served as "ethnocratic bureaucracies" where the privilege of democracy was reserved for whites only. Thus, empowerment for African Americans amounts to changing a legacy of Eurocentric ethnicity and the contradictions this idea represents in pluralistic multicultural institutions of education.

Jeffrey Pfeffer's Managing With Power chapter 18 (1-7) asserts that its one thing to understand power, its sources, and forms, but another thing to use that knowledge. Power he asserts is

understanding one's self, situation, and the other people needed to influence and get things done. Chris Argyris (115) elaborates on this notion of understanding as a "double loop phenomena" in which one must understand the games people play in order to hide the games they are really playing. He states that underlying every behavior, meaning of behavior, and assumption about behavior is a theoretical construct. Structural change he says is only temporary. Meaningful change can only occur as a result of new theories, knowledge and understanding. Thus, we would like to determine if administrators and teachers perceive an Afrocentric perspective in education as a valuable tool for the empowerment of workers in education.

Carter G. Woodson's Miseducation of the American Negro, is today a much broader issue of the miseducation "about" the American Negro. Misconceptions and ignorance about African Americans serves to disempower all Americans from dealing effectively with the legacy and impact of racism in education today. Perhaps in fact, the omission of Afrocentric perspectives plays as significant a role in enabling racism in our society as does the belief that there is a casual relationship between race and behavior. This study does not explore the extent to which administrators nor teachers perceive such a causality, but it will provide interesting findings concerning their respective perceptions on the organizational need and effectiveness of new Afrocentric perspectives in education. It will provide valuable information

for formulating strategy and policy around Afrocentric educational issues.

Strategies For Implementation:

A survey instrument was developed and used during the focus group discussion. A normative group quasi delphi matrix technique was used to involve participants in discussion of each item in the questionnaire and to elaborate on their views of the issues as they perceived them from their own felt perceptions. The following account describes the reported data collected from each of the two focus group sessions using the following sample questionnaire.

Description of Questionnaire:

You are being asked to participate in an exploratory focus group to collect some general data by which to develop a more focused look at the issue of Afrocentric perspectives in American Education. Each of you have been given a brief outline of the theoretical assumptions surrounding this study and the enclosed questionnaire. During this session we are asking you to address directly any questions and or concerns you may have regarding the content, structure, or issue being probed by these questions. Feel free to participate and comment, joining in on the discussion as the spirit moves you. At the conclusion to this process I would ask that you please indicate by checking the appropriate response weather you A agree, N have no opinion, or D disagree in response to the following questions.

1. An Afrocentric perspective is a valuable asset in American education for affecting positive performance outcomes for African Americans in:

a.	Student Performance?	A N D	e.	Supervision?	A N D
b.	Human Relations?	A N D	f.	Staffing?	A N D
c.	Curriculum?	A N D	g.	Leadership?	A N D
d.	Instruction?	A N D	h.	Management?	A N D

2. An Afrocentric perspective in education empowers people to effectively address problems of racism in:

a.	Student Performance?	A N D	e.	Supervision?	A N D
b.	Human Relations?	A N D	f.	Staffing?	A N D
c.	Curriculum?	A N D	g.	Leadership?	A N D
d.	Instruction?	A N D	h.	Management?	A N D

3. An Afrocentric resource center would assist an institution in:

a.	Student Performance?	A N D	e.	Supervision?	A N D
b.	Human Relations?	A N D	f.	Staffing?	A N D
c.	Curriculum?	A N D	g.	Leadership?	A N D
d.	Instruction?	A N D	h.	Management?	A N D

Focus Group Characteristics:

The first focus group was conducted amongst the Elizabeth City Northeastern North Carolina School Masters Club. This is an organization of concerned African American Educators that have been in existence for over thirty years. Though the group's by laws provide for women members, to date the group has been historically all male; and thus, this first focus group does not offer any cross sampling across gender or race; instead it provides a unique collection of three generations of educators with career experiences amongst more than half the group ranging more than half

a century. The group consisted of four retired school principals, one retired assistant superintendent, two active school principals who currently are the only African American High School principals in the Pasquatank County system, one School Board member from Gaines county, and three academicians currently on the faculty of Elizabeth City State University all with extensive administrative and teaching experience at the secondary and college level. Since I was one of the academicians I count the focus group as having only ten members and me as the facilitator.

The second focus group consisted of a graduate class of ten students, three of whom already had Masters Degrees, five with less than two years teaching experience and five with more than ten years experience, two in fact had over twenty years experience teaching. Three of the students taught at the primary level while the other seven were from high schools. There was an equal distribution of men to women and white to black. One student with mixed Filipino ancestry identified herself as black and is included in the count of 5 black and 5 white students. All of the students were enrolled in a course titled Education Supervision and were primarily concerned with meeting certification requirements for public school administration.

Focus Group Findings:

The most obvious distinction between focus group one and focus group two was their concern for different questionnaire items. Focus group one seemed more concerned with supervision,

staffing, leadership, and management, while focus group two focused on student performance, human relations, curriculum, and instruction, as listed on the preceding questionnaire. Focus group one expressed strong views that one of the negative affects of integration over the past twenty years has been the elimination of any Afrocentric perspective in American education. The older members were nostalgic about the days when African Americans had full control over the old segregated school class room and could administer curriculum, instruction, and discipline with the full support and consensus of the community. No one found this view objectionable.

They all felt that African American student performance was favorably influenced with the inclusion of pertinent facts and information related to their cultural contributions or experiences, and all objected to the notion of a Black History week or month. One member stated that this makes it seem as though the African's contribution was a peripheral part time or tangent factor in American and world culture. Another used an example of the inclusion of the singing of "Lift Every Voice" or "The Negro National Anthem" as an issue that reached school board dispute and national notoriety when an Elementary School principal in Norfolk Virginia included it as part of the normal assembly activity. It was finally discerned that the words of this song held a relevant message for all students and the decision and tradition of singing the song still stands, and has over time gained both white and black parental support.

For focus group one the inclusion of an Afrocentric curriculum, instruction, and human relations were critical issues associated with supervision, staffing, leadership and management. All agreed that the mere act of staffing an adequate number of African Americans in all levels of the institution was perhaps a more critical concern than the curriculum. As isolated administrators and even principals surrounded by hostile layers of subordinate supervisors, staff and instructors, the issue facing most African American administrators was not providing Afrocentric focused leadership but mere survival. An overall consensus existed that the most critical management issue facing Afrocentric ideas was critical mass. In environments where you have a critical mass of integration amongst the administrators, supervisors, staff, and teachers a greater chance exist for organizational culture to have the sensitivity needed for an Afrocentric perspective to thrive and prosper. In the absence of such conditions, however, Afrocentric perspectives become a blind idea falling on deaf ears. Even simple issues of funding basic student activities or extracurricular events with an Afrocentric bent or flavor often become dangerous power plays that many administrators would rather avoid.

In focus group two both white and black participants agreed that relevancy was an important aspect of any student's performance. There was no general agreement, however, that the Afrocentric perspective would provide the type or relevancy that might in fact turn around negative student performance. Many participants expressed, both white, black, male and female, that a

more true determinant of student performance was family influence. That the actual remedy for affecting current trends amongst disadvantaged students, both black and white was not Afrocentricism but strong parental support and discipline. In fact two of the African American male focus group members felt that it was not the content of math or science that caused problems in student performance but a lack of discipline in students to apply themselves in these areas. The women in the group were not quite happy with this position. They felt the absence of relevant role models, in particular black males, was a particular problem. A point which the first focus group also illuded to because they felt the presence of a black math or science teacher might be more instrumental in affecting student performance than the mere inclusion of obscure facts about black scientist or mathematicians in the curriculum.

Both men and women in focus group two agreed that many of the current curriculum attempts to address specifically identity issues, or learning problems faced by disadvantaged students, created pedagogies of low expectations and failure. Both groups saw the presence of more African American teachers as an essential means to turn around much of the historic tracking that seems to steer most black students out of the hard science and math areas of the curriculum. The creation of special watered down curriculum often used for slower paced learners was also seen as a major deterrent to motivated learning, and seems to target disadvantaged black students. It was generally felt that these were critical

areas relevant to Afrocentric management perspectives and should be addressed through the leadership in education.

Human relations was quickly redefined as interracial interaction, and mixed views were expressed as to the degree to which an Afrocentric perspective helped or actually antagonized racial tension. This was an important issue in both groups. However, group two saw the issue in broader application. To them the absence of any clear definition of African American culture leaves both white and black student pray to the stereotypes of "Boys In The Hood or Poetic Justice." The clear absence of any meaningful curriculum leaves many to suppose that Afrocentric is a street dialect of "original gangster and Yo man what up." This view was expressed especially by the men, though the one white man in the group seemed intentionally shy on the issue, that perhaps the greatest human relations concern of an Afrocentric perspective might be in the area of black on black interaction as opposed to white on black. There was a sense of unanimous consensus on this issue.

The next most important distinction that group two provided was in the area of instruction. The group expressed strong unanimity that the nurturing and caring skills of instructors were far more important than any particular Afrocentric curriculum.

However, the black members unanimously felt that a larger presence of black instructors would enhance the over all sensitivity and effectiveness of the environment for responding affectively to Afrocentric concerns in education. In adition group two discussed their own inadequacies in being able to integrate effectively African American curriculum into their classroom.

In addressing the second and third question on the questionnaire there was agreement amongst both focus groups that an Afrocentric perspective could assist in addressing problems of racism. Neither group felt the eight organizational dimensions of this questionnaire particularly relevant to the last two questions and so did not dwell on these items in any meaningful depth. There was mention by focus group one that clear leadership vision, and direction towards Afrocentric ideas in education is perhaps the most empowering element for affectively addressing issues of racism in American education. All members of both focus groups felt that an Afrocentric perspective would definitely need a resource center of some kind to be effective or even introduced in any meaningful way into a school environment.

Summary and Conclusion:

It was clear from this exploratory focus group that the Afrocentric perspective in American education is an issue that has come of age. The contrasting concerns of both administrators and teachers briefly presented here make it crystal clear that more in depth analysis is needed of the organizational implications of an

Afrocentric idea in education. The identification of demographic preference or patterns of felt perceptions based on race, sex, grade level, etc. through a wider sampling could provide critical information for addressing concerns of different teacher, staff, supervisory, and administrative constituencies. The need for Afrocentric resource centers within schools and systems is clear. Weather such resources should be informal groupings of concerned people or more structured funded components of the organization is a contingent matter for each environment to work out on its own. However, as argued in the theoretical construct of this paper if we intend to affectively address issues of racism and the legacy of omission of African Americans from the American consciousness, then the Afrocentric idea is more than just a notion, but an essential step toward progress and greater inclusion of our young gifted and black into the American dream.

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